

Early History of The Compilation of the Hadith

By

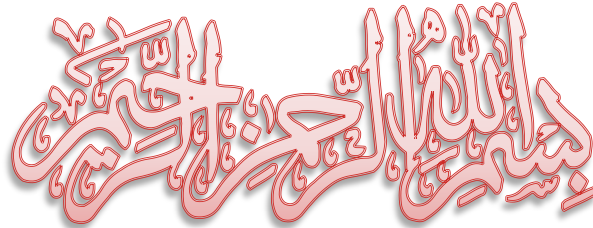
Dr. M. HAMIDULLAH, Ph.D., D.Litt.

Early History of The Compilation of the Hadith

Dr Muhammad Hamidullah

www.facebook.com/Dr.Muhammad.Hamidullah

www.facebook.com/payamequran



The Hadith Recorded in the Life-time of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

It is common knowledge that the art of letters was not much cultivated in pre-Islamic times in Mecca, the cradle of Islam. Even the “gentile Prophet” (*an-nabi al-ummi*, peace be upon him!), one of the most gifted and cultured youths of the town in those days, was an illiterate; and could not read or write a word (*cf.* The Qur’an, 29:48, *matakhuttuhu biyaminik*).

When he was appointed messenger of God, the very first revelation Muhammad (peace be upon him!) received was a command to read and write:

“Read in the name of thy Lord, Who has created:
Who has created man from a clot;
Read, for it is thy Lord, the Most Glorious, Who has
taught through the pen:

Who has taught man what he knew not.”(The Qur’an, 96.)

Convinced as Muhammad was that it was a divine revelation, he could not disregard the command so expressly enjoined. In fact we see him; even in the very early days of Islam, taking care that the portions of the Qur’an, revealed to him from time to time, should be recorded in writing, and that their copies should multiply (*cf.* the incident at the conversion of ‘Umar). Muhammad was extremely modest, and that is apparently the chief reason why in those days he did not pay attention to getting — or as certain traditions testify, even permitting — his own personal exhortations and preachings to be reduced to writing. But soon a new revelation assured:

“And whatever he (Muhammad) utters, it is not of his own whim and fancy;
It is naught else but a divine revelation revealed unto him.” (The Qur’an, 53:3-4.)

The converts must then have begun to pay greater attention to taking notes of the sayings of their Prophet. The educational policy of the Prophet was fast increasing literacy among his disciples. So much so that soon after his migration to Medina, he encountered not the least difficulty in enforcing the Quranic command (*cf.* 2:280) to have a compulsory resort to writing in all cases of monetary and commercial transactions on credit, and to get them attested by two or more male or female witnesses.

We must naturally distinguish between what the Prophet himself had got written for him and what his disciples wrote for

their own personal use regarding the sayings and doings of their master.

Official Writings:

Among the first category, we find a document of peculiar interest. It dates from the very first year of the Hegira. It refers to the promulgation of the constitution of the confederal city-state of Medina, which he was organising soon after his migration to that city (*cf.* The First Written Constitution).

We know that scarcely two or three months had passed on his arrival in Medina, when the Prophet began to send military expeditions from time to time to various places. There was no standing army in the City-State; volunteers were enlisted every time. The books of *Hadith* and *Sirah* record that for every individual expedition a register was opened in which the names of volunteers, and probably many other details, were recorded. Some of these expeditions ended in the conclusion of pacts and treaties. Of these we shall speak later.

In his compendium *Sahih* (*cf.* 56:181, No.1) the Imam Bukhari speaks of another incident of interest. He records that once the Prophet ordered that a census of the whole Muslim population be taken. The registers showed 1,500 entries of men and women who professed Islam. This must date at the latest from the second year of the Hegira, probably just after the battle of Badr, or thereabouts.

Further, we know with what rapidity the Islamic state expanded its borders in the time of the Prophet. Beginning with



(Left) An inscription on a rock near the summit of the northern end of Mount Sal', near Medina. This inscription is in Thuluth script and its dimensions are 63 inches broad and 47 inches high



(Right) Another inscription on the Mount Sal', which is 28½ inches broad and 21 inches high

Both these inscriptions date from the days of Prophet



(Left) A letter from the Prophet Muhammad to Al-Munzir bin Sawwa, of Bahrain, inviting him to accept Islam. This was one of the letters addressed by the Prophet to various foreign Christian potentates. This letter bears the seal of the Prophet

about 120 square miles of the city and the surrounding *Haram* of Medina, it stretched its arms, at the average rate of about 250 square miles daily for a period of ten long years, to embrace the surrounding territories; and when the Prophet breathed his last, he was able to hand over to his Caliphs a state as large as Europe, minus Russia, a territory including southern Palestine and parts of southern Iraq together with the whole of the Arabian Peninsula, with a population certainly of several millions. The needs of the chancellory of the central government of even the most primitive type must have been considerable as regards writing work. I myself was able in 1941 to publish over 250 letters emanating from the Prophet, not to speak of letters received by him. And since that publication, I was fortunate in tracing a score more to be incorporated in the second edition of this *al-Watha'iq as-Siyasiyah* (ed. Cairo).

These documents of the time of the Prophet contain instructions to provincial governors and judges, treaties with tribal chiefs, grants of charters, recognition of particular proprietary rights, purchase of slaves, manumission of slaves, missionary letters exhorting individuals to embrace Islam, and a host of other matters.

Private Records:

The second category has also several very instructive and illuminating incidents to record.

A certain Malik and his wife were very devout Medinite Muslims. On the arrival of the Prophet in their town, they offered

their young son, Anas, to be a personal servant to him. For almost a decade, Anas lived night and day with him. The boy was very intelligent, and had also learnt reading and writing, thanks probably to the battle of Badr when the Prophet asked the prisoners of war to ransom their persons by service, namely teaching ten boys each to read and write. Anyhow, Anas says: “Every now and then I took down in notes interesting points from what the Prophet said in his discourses and other occasions of conversation; and I used to read these notes over to the Prophet whenever I found him having leisure, and after he had corrected them, I made a fair copy of them for my own record.” In fact he accumulated a big roll of such notes, and in his later life he used to show it to his curious pupils, who flocked to listen to the Hadith from him. I am inclined to believe that the compilation has not been lost but is amalgamated in the Musnad, of Ibn Hanbal, in the chapter “Anas”.

Abdullah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘As has another story to tell about what had happened to him: “One day I said to the Prophet: O Messenger of God, you say many nice things in your sermons, but with the lapse of time I forget many details of them. The Prophet said: Take help from your right hand, meaning thereby that I should write. I dared not take notes of the Hadith before, but ever since I have tried to record all that interested me from the sayings and doings of the Prophet.” The compilation was named by the author as *Sahifah Sadiqah*; and it, was inherited for generations in his family. In fact we find his grandson dictating to his pupils with this book in hand. This book also seems to have been incorporated in the Musnad of Ibn Hanbal, to which subject I shall have to return soon.

‘Amr ibn Hazm was one of the provincial governors of the time of the Prophet. On his appointment to the Yemen, he had received long instructions, evidently written, regarding administrative matters such as rate of taxes, justice, education, supervision of public morals, etc. We possess a booklet, apparently the earliest of its kind, containing these instructions as well as 22 other letters emanating from the Prophet. To all appearance, the Governor ‘Amr ibn Hazm had compiled a collection of the letters of the Prophet in so far as he could get access to them or they interested him, as being of any administrative interest. A perusal of the contents of the collection shows that ‘Amr must have served in different parts of the country and in different governmental capacities in order to have access to the documents in question. (For details see the bibliography of my *Documents sur la Diplomatie Musulmane a l’époque du Prophete*).

These and several other instances refer to the recording of the Hadith in the very lifetime of the Prophet by people who had first-hand knowledge of the same.

There is another category, in which the testimony is first hand. This is when the Companions of the Prophet write or dictate their memoirs after the death of the Prophet, when apparently there was increasing demand for such literature:

Thus we have the memoirs of ‘Aisha (wife of the Prophet), of ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ud, of Ibn ‘Abbas, of Ibn ‘Umar, of Abu Hurairah and many others. There are cases when the memoirs of different Companions were prepared under the auspices of the government.

The Musnad of Ibn Hanbal:

I conclude this sketch by a personal incident. In 1933, I was studying in the Staatsbibliothek of Berlin. I wanted to consult a certain MS. It was a collection of several tracts. I opened it and while turning its pages, I came across a small monograph which was not recorded in the detailed descriptive catalogue of that library. To my great astonishment it was called the *Sahifah Hammam ibn Munabbih*. It was a collection of a hundred odd traditions of the Prophet all narrated by the author on the authority of his teacher Abu-Hurairah, the Companion of the Prophet.

Hammam died in the early thirties of the second century of Hegira at an advanced age. Thus the first written, *extant*, collection of Hadith dates not from Bukhari or even the Imam Malik but Hammam, if we exclude the *al-Majmu' f'il-Hadith of Zaid ibn 'Ali* (d. 120 H.) the MSS. of which I have consulted in Sanaa (the Yemen) in 1946.

I compared the MS. of Hammam with the chapter Abu-Hurairah, section Hammam, in the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal. The chain of narrators in the two collections, my MS. and the *Musnad*, is completely different in the later stages, yet the contents are astonishingly the same with this difference, that the order of certain traditions slightly differs; or that at least one folio leaf was missing in the MS. of which the Berlin MS. is a copy.

This means that the *Sahifah* of Hammam was also absorbed integrally in the all-embracing *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal; and we can trust that the apparent loss of other earlier works, such as the

collections of Anas and ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘As need not be much deplored as in fact they have been fully conserved in the different chapters of the voluminous *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal.

This also shows how the works of the time of the Prophet and his Companions were amalgamated in the larger works of the Tabi’un (the Followers of the Companions of the Prophet), and the works of these latter have been conserved in the still larger compendia of Ibn Hanbal, Bukhari, Muslim, etc., and the earlier works had thus become practically superfluous.

Thus there is no link lost; the traditions of the Arabian Prophet were preserved at first hand, and have come down to us in a manner worthy of all faith and trust.

Of course the intellectual capacities of the different Companions of the Prophet, the circumstances and context of different traditions and many other factors are of great scientific importance; but for them we have a special science, the *Usui Hadith wa rijal*, that marvellous invention and even monopoly of the Muslims, which gives us full guidance in this respect. We are not concerned with it to-day. What we wanted was to show that a large part of the words and deeds of the Prophet of Islam were not recorded, as is sometimes supposed, several centuries after his death but in his own life-time; and this by those who had first-hand knowledge of the facts related, and that these first-hand records have come down to us in a tolerably trustworthy manner, which compares favourably with similar records regarding founders of other religions.

Conclusion:

No doubt, the personal element in oral transmissions has its own importance and merit: a trustworthy and learned witness personally testifying that “I saw or heard this or that” has undeniably a far superior and weightier reason to be believed than any written record which is obviously subject to falsification and other less reprehensible modifications and mistakes on the part of the copyist. Had the Islamic tradition remained only orally transmitted, by means of the generations of trustworthy narrators, it would not in the least have diminished its credibility. But, as we have seen, the traditions of the Prophet of Islam have been doubly fortunate, in that they have been recorded to a large extent in black and white by witnesses who had a first-hand knowledge of the facts related, combined with the personal element in the manner of transmission which has been peculiarly Muslim.

For a more elaborate discussion, I would refer the readers to the work, serially published, of Prof. Manazir Ahsan of the Osmania University, Hyderabad-Deccan, “*Tadween-e-Hadith*.” Suffices to say that in early centuries of Islam, the Hadith, even as the Quran, was both memorised and recorded simultaneously, thus assuring the virtues of both the methods and eviting the vices of either taken alone.



To Download Books and Articles of
Dr Muhammad Hamidullah

Visit our page:

www.facebook.com/Dr.Muhammad.Hamidullah

Our other pages and blogs:

www.facebook.com/payamequran

www.facebook.com/Payam.e.Iqbal

www.ebooksland.blogspot.com

www.facebook.com/ye.Meri.dunyaa

www.facebook.com/Dr.Muhammad.Hamidullah